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THURSTON HOPKINS, PHOTOJOURNALIST. AN ARTS COUNCIL PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION

Record
1975
10p.

Children dancing, a picture from a story on children of London pavements, Islington, London, 1954

Foreword

This touring exhibition continues the Arts Council's series of one-man shows devoted to the work of British photographers. After a period as a freelance photographer Thurston Hopkins joined the staff of *Picture Post* in 1950 and worked with the magazine until it closed in 1957. Thurston Hopkins has carefully selected this exhibition from thousands of pictures taken during the 20 years of his career. We also thank him for contributing the biography that follows. The Radio Times Hulton Picture Library which now owns most of the *Picture Post* negatives has been most cooperative and Gerry Grove, who worked with Thurston Hopkins for the magazine, has skilfully prepared the exhibition prints.

J.D.

Introduction

Almost all of the photographs in this selection resulted, either directly or indirectly, from my willing acceptance of an assignment. Without the incentive to satisfy a professional demand I doubt if I would have taken many of them, because supplying magazine editors with pictures they could use – which is rather different to giving them what they *think* they can use – has been my main preoccupation and satisfaction. At the time when I was constantly using a camera, and working with deadlines very much in mind, I maintained a brisk productivity, sometimes barely conscious of the pictures I kept winding on, although I was always very aware of how the *story* was shaping, because it was this that mattered most to me.

I sometimes have to remind myself that I became a photographer only because a king chose to abdicate. It was a pure accident – perhaps it was even a mistake. In the early thirties I was making a rather thin living as a freelance black-and-white graphic illustrator for boys' books and women's magazines; eventually things got so bad that I took a job on a Fleet Street picture agency. This agency needed a draughtsman to design heraldic settings to show off an exclusive collection of photographs of the Prince of Wales which, had Edward become king, would have been in great demand all over the world. But when he stepped down from the throne – which he did when I had only just commenced embellishing his likeness with laurel wreaths and battleships – the collection became almost valueless overnight, and my presence on the agency superfluous. The proprietor of the business, a kindly man named Lymbery – and incidentally a pioneer press photographer – regretfully informed me that my services were no longer necessary. 'I suppose,' he said as I was about to leave his office, 'you've never thought of taking photographs?' I admitted that such a thought had not crossed my mind, and that I'd never even owned a camera. 'Why not try?' he suggested. 'I'll lend you mine. It's very simple really; you'll get the hang of it in a day or so.'

Jobs of any kind in the thirties were scarce, so I allowed him to place in my hands the black instrument of torture which was to make my life a misery over the subsequent weeks.

I should explain that the standard press camera at that time was a daunting instrument for even someone with a working knowledge of photography to handle effectively; for someone with no experience at all, and an aversion for mechanical things of any kind, it was a cruel punishment. With no optical rangefinder, no established shutter speeds and, of course, no exposure meter, the cameraman had to obtain his results through a combination of rapid judgement of distances, accurate estimation of light intensity and vigorous manual dexterity.

After thirty minutes of instruction, which was all the practical training in photography I ever received, I hurried out on my first assignment. Not surprisingly the pictures I took that morning were classic examples of every technical error it is possible to make in photography. For weeks my kindly benefactor sent me out on a succession of minor assignments, and every time I showed my negatives to the head printer he let out peals of derisive laughter. By the end of the month I sensed my employer's faith in me was slipping: clearly everyone was telling him he had backed a loser. Sometimes he called me to his desk by the window and personally examined my glass negatives against the light, and I have a painful memory of him lifting them dripping from the rack one by one and, after a brief silent examination, letting them fall with a damp thud into the waste-paper basket. Once he reflected aloud, with a sigh: 'There are, of course, people who will *never* make photographers.'

At the time I was inclined to agree with him, and looking back I am at a loss to explain why I should have persisted in an occupation for which I had little real inclination or respect, and for which, in many ways, I was totally unsuited. It was an unhappy period of my life because in the thirties cliché thinking and ruthless tactics were even more a passport to survival in Fleet Street than they are today. I suspect the sarcastic remarks directed at me by the other photographers had a lot to do with my crazy determination to prove myself in this frankly hostile backwater of popular journalism.

Whatever the reason, I slowly began to improve, until at the end of three months – my period of probation – I was regularly seeing my pictures in print. I worked out the year with the agency because I felt I owed it this for all the materials I had run through, and then I went back home to think things over. I never seriously considered spending my life in newspaper photography, but equally I could no longer see myself bent over a drawing board while all the excitement of living went on outside.

An American critic has called photojournalism a 'massive form of sociability' and undoubtedly it was this side of photography which particularly appealed to my restless disposition when, during the war, I began to come upon copies of *Picture Post* in every tent and service club overseas. As I was in the R.A.F. Photographic Unit during those war years I lived more or less in the constant company of other photographers and technicians, and many a long desert evening was passed in the darkness of our tent heatedly debating the 'aesthetics' of photography. I found that hardly any of my companions shared my enthusiasm for the plain reportage photographs in *Picture Post*; in fact nobody considered these seriously because quite clearly they were not the work of 'camera artists'. What they objected to in these pictures – an absence of fine detail and dramatic camera angles – I saw as one of their main virtues. Henry Miller's perceptive remark about Brassai: that he had 'that rare gift which so many artists despise – *normal vision*', perfectly sums up the work of the early *Picture Post* photographers.

After brooding for several days over the work of the photographers I particularly admired – Kurt Hutton,

Felix Mann, Leonard McCombe and the marvellous Dr Salomon – I took off for the Continent with what remained of my service gratuity. For several months I hitched my way from city to city, doing stories on places and people until I felt I had enough ammunition for another assault on *Picture Post*, the stronghold of British photojournalism. A few days later I was having lunch with Harry Deverson, the picture editor. 'We like some of your ideas,' he opened cautiously. 'This Cats of London . . . how long do you think it would take to shoot?' Slightly disappointed that he had not picked up my offer to go down the Yangtze River I replied firmly: 'One week.' Deverson smiled pityingly across the table. 'I think you had better take a month. You'll need it . . .' he paused significantly '. . . if you are going to satisfy us.'

When completed the story made four pages in *Picture Post* and I was paid the, to me at that time, vast sum of one hundred pounds. The immediate results of this initial success was a stream of varied commissions which ultimately led to my being more or less 'ordered' to join the staff. Apparently questions were being asked about the quantity of money paid out to one particular free-lance photographer, and I was pressed to join because they reasoned it would be cheaper that way.

Strange as it seems to me now, I remember hesitating before accepting a staff appointment. I think I feared the loss of my independence although I need not have worried. *Picture Post* allowed, in fact encouraged, extensive personal freedom: and even tolerated – to a remarkable degree – the most excessive and idiosyncratic behaviour from a fiercely individual staff. Certainly my years with the magazine were the most exciting and productive of my professional career, and it is a matter for deep regret that today's young photojournalists do not have a comparable goal to strive for.

Many photojournalists disapprove of the photographer coming from behind his camera and assisting the outcome of a picture, and of course the long shadow of Cartier-Bresson falls cautioningly over us all. But – no doubt because of my early ambitions in the field of graphic illustration – I have been unable at all times to resist stage-managing certain photographs. The narrative possibilities of a planned picture, providing it is not a distortion of actuality, seem to me at least as deserving of serious attention as the arresting of the significant moment. Working for *Picture Post* in the latter half of its existence there were frequent opportunities – some might say too frequent – to dramatise situations, even illustrate fiction. Not all the staff photographers enjoyed doing this but it was very much to my liking. Functioning as a sort of one-man film unit, I wrote my own script, selected the actors – mostly non-professional – and the locations, and directed with a great show of assurance and enthusiasm. The more pressure I applied to my subjects the better they reacted, and I felt in my element exercising control over a small group of fairly unpromising performers, and seeing something come out of it all. The gamble of improvisation appealed to me, of suddenly throwing my cast into a piece of unplanned action or against a surprising location and finding it all worked in a curiously unforeseeable way. It was very satisfying when there emerged, in Ken Russell's admirable phrase, 'a kind of intangible authenticity.'

But on serious assignments I would only reconstruct a picture in a way which I knew to be faithful to the original in every detail. For instance, I am satisfied that my picture of the Liverpool slum child in bed is in no way an exaggeration of the true facts. When I first looked into the room it was exactly as you see it in the picture – except the bed was empty. On being assured by the mother that this was where her daughter slept I simply waited until the child returned from school and then asked the mother to put her to bed, just as she would any night. The child slipped beneath the grubby covers and the newspapers – I swear I did not introduce them into the picture – and closed her eyes like the perfect little actress she proved to be, and I made my exposure.

I take the rather unpopular view among photographers – that words and pictures need one another. This is probably an old-fashioned concept for I notice that many students, long before they have looked a real editor in the eye, declare war on the hateful Print Men, while many fine photojournalists really object to going on an assignment with a writer. Yet the advantages of the writer-photographer team are surely considerable and I can think of many stories which would have been difficult to bring to a satisfactory conclusion had I been obliged to carry them out alone. But aside from the material assistance writers were able to give photographers, it was their daily companionship I most valued. Writers I did a great deal of work with, and with whom I established an especial rapport, were the late Kenneth Allsop, Brian Dowling, David Mitchell and Robert Muller. I could not imagine four more diverting travelling companions than these, and it was their professional support and infectious enthusiasm that I missed most when *Picture Post* came to an end. Nor would I like to neglect saying a few words about my editor, Frank Dowling – since nobody else seems inclined to do so. Dowling took on the unenviable, and almost impossible, task of preventing the magazine from falling apart following the fatal dismissal of Tom Hopkinson and from the beginning he was beset with difficulties of every kind. On the whole I think he did a rather better job than many have allowed. He certainly gave his photographers a great deal of encouragement, allowed them bigger credits than previously, and dispatched encouraging cables to his teams all over the world. Frank Dowling possessed the quality I value most in a man: a warm humanity.

Thurston Hopkins 1975

Biography

Born in 1913
Trained as a magazine illustrator at Brighton College of Art
Worked as a Fleet Street Press Photographer from 1930 onwards
1939–45 with the RAF Photographic Unit in Italy and the Middle East
1946–49 a period of freelancing for newspapers and magazines, travelling throughout Europe
1949–57 worked exclusively for *Picture Post*, at first in a freelance capacity, then as a staff photographer.
Received two awards for British Press Pictures of the Year
1958–68 worked mainly for advertising agencies
1968 commenced teaching in schools of photography; at first part time in Birmingham, and later full time at the Guildford School of Photography, West Surrey College of Art and Design, where he is now Lecturer in Editorial Photographic Studies.

Barry Lane, Exhibition organiser
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Couple on sofa, at a Coming Out Party, Highgate,
London, 1955

Child on bed, a picture from Liverpool slums story which
won 1st prize in British Press Pictures of the Year Sequence Awards, 1957